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THE FUTURE OF MODERN LANGUAGE IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

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A PERIOD of reconstruction is a period of flux, during which many social changes are both indicated and made possible that in normal times would be of merely speculative or academic interest. The changes now actually taking place in the high-school curriculum are of wide-reaching significance; among them the future of modern-language study assumes great importance.

We all know that the expansion of modern-language study in high schools is of comparatively recent origin, and that German, French, and latterly Spanish in large measure owe their rapid advancement and secure position to the decline of the classics. The latter, long the bulwark of all higher forms of education, have gradually lost their hold. The college course of study has become so diversified that proficiency in the ancient languages can no longer be regarded a fair requirement in preparation for the varied courses which even the small college now offers in its program of liberal arts and sciences. Though many regret the passing of the classics, it can no longer be said that a college course finds them indispensable.

The rise of the modern languages has doubtless been stimulated by the colleges which stood ready to accept this type of training as a substitute for the classics among the requirements for entrance, and likewise among the requirements for graduation. But signs are not wanting that the rigor of this requirement on the part of the colleges is in turn declining. The professional and technical schools of a university seem to find less need of the modern tongues than they once did, and the high schools, realizing that only about one-third of their students will enter any institution of higher learning, whether college or university, normal school or technical

institute, are busy planning courses which bear no relationship and intend no articulation whatever with the schools of an advanced grade.

A severe blow to the study of foreign languages was administered by the war, when German, the most popular and perhaps the most efficient type of modern language instruction which our secondary schools had come to give, was widely and abruptly removed from the curriculum. This, of course, put an added burden upon French and Spanish and also upon Latin, to meet the foreign-language requirements in a course of study that was still in force. The stimulation of teacher-training in the modern-languages was immediately apparent; but the supply of material was far behind the demand, both as to quantity and quality. Many teachers of German took over courses of French and Spanish, but not without a more or less serious impairment of efficiency in the instruction.

Any subject which is effectively taught will always have a good name; but whenever it fails to maintain a high standard of instructional value, through the poor equipment of some or all of its teachers, it will hold its esteem with difficulty—no matter how good a case one can make out for it as a subject. Under such conditions complaints are heard from parents and administrators, and in justifying the requirement of studying a foreign language, one is forced to reconsider its place in the curriculum. It is not enough to assume, merely, that foreign languages must be pursued by a large number of high-school students, either because that has been the rule in the past, or because many colleges require four or five such units for entrance to their courses. The traditional or conventional value of a subject is not sufficient to make it acceptable if it is not well taught; nor is the influence of the college equal to the task of holding a subject in esteem when its place in the curriculum of the high school is attacked. Sooner or later, if the attack is not successfully countered, the college will alter its requirements and withdraw its support. For, after all, the college depends less upon the subject-matter which its entering students may have mastered in the high school than upon a certain level of intellectual maturity and scholarly interest. Practically every high-school subject is found in the college curriculum; it is only in the case of the foreign languages, and to some extent mathematics, that the college course attempts to articulate with and continue a course of study already begun.

The foreign languages have in this regard a peculiarly effective leverage with the colleges. It may be necessary to review and brush up the high points of algebra, geometry, and trigonometry after the student is enrolled in his college course of higher mathematics; with French, German, and Latin he either has or has not the requisite proficiency to continue in the advanced work. But since elementary language-work is also done in the colleges, a student may be readily reduced to the ranks and made to start over again; this is not quite so simple a procedure in the case of mathematics. Still the colleges realize that elementary work in a foreign tongue is not of university grade, and they would be thankful to be relieved of it. Hence they foster these studies in the high school, as being subjects which can be so effectively taught in the secondary school as to yield students trained and disciplined for the work of advanced grade.

But despite the obvious advantage to the college departments concerned in receiving students who have had one, two, three, or four years of sound instruction in a foreign language, there are but four or five departments of study which directly profit from this. Others which might profit indirectly, were they able to assume that their students could read French or German, Latin or Greek, can not do so because experience teaches that such a mastery of a foreign tongue is quite exceptional. Even were the preparation adequate, no single student would have command over all these tongues, nor could any group of students of one class, say in economics or philosophy, be assumed to have such command over a single foreign language that the class could be set to reading treatises in the original.

The question, therefore, becomes vital both to the college and to the high school: Why should either demand the study of a language of which no greater use is or can be made even after several years of tutelage? The classicists were wont to answer this question by a resort to the theory of formal discipline. The study of a classical language trains the mind; it makes one observant and logical in his reasoning; it contributes to his vocabulary in the vernacular, and assists him in the selection of words to express the finer shades of meaning; it trains his memory, and cultivates his appreciation, both of linguistic values, and likewise of ideas, which find so distinguished an expression in the classics.

But, however real these values—and I shall not deny their existence—the fact remains that Greek has practically disappeared from the high school, and is kept alive with difficulty in the college. Latin, though still perhaps the most favored of the foreign languages in secondary schools, has lost its leadership in the college curriculum, and was increasing its enrollment in the high school far less rapidly before the war than was French, German, or Spanish. According to the report of the Commissioner of Education, enrollments in Latin increased between 1910 and 1915, in round numbers, from 400,000 to 500,000; German from less than 200,000 to more than 300,000; French from 95,000 to 135,000, and Spanish from 5,000 to 35,000. The increase in Latin was about 25%; that in German 62%; that in French 42% and that in Spanish still greater.¹ Taken altogether, the three modern languages increased their enrollments from about 290,000 to about 480,000, or approximately 65%.

These figures and others that might be given show clearly that the modern languages were displacing Latin before the war period set in, even though they had as yet barely reached the total enrollment of the classics. What has happened since 1915, I can only conjecture, but with the sharp decline in German previously the most vigorous of the group, it is hardly to be expected that the encroachment of the modern languages upon Latin has become very much more marked, and it is quite possible that the percentage of enrollments in all foreign languages may have fallen off.

With the readjustments in the curriculum which the conditions of war and its aftermath have made inevitable, there must be a further consideration of the educational values attaching to the study of foreign languages in general, and to the modern language in particular. Since 1900 the study of Latin had fallen from an enrollment of approximately 50% of all high school pupils to about 37% in 1915. And while the modern tongues enjoyed their greatest increase during this period, they must have suffered since that time, at least through the decline of German.

What, then, can be said for the modern languages that will justify their retention in the high-school curriculum as an essential feature of the course of study? The claim to special disciplinary values, of which the classical tongues have made so much, has

¹ Inglis, A. *Principles of Secondary Education*. 1918. p. 448 f.

never been emphasized to the same extent by advocates of the modern studies; for the simple reason, perhaps, that these values are of a lesser degree in the modern studies than they are in the classics. Hence, if one would secure first of all the discipline of linguistic study, one might better pursue Latin and Greek. Disciplinary values, however, are by no means negligible in the study of modern languages; and if other and supplemental values can be attributed to French, German, and Spanish, which perhaps do not attach to Latin and Greek, the gradual shift from the classics to the modern tongues may, on the whole be beneficial, and the dominant position of foreign-language study still worthy of continued support.

But what are these supplemental values? First in our minds, is the direct and specific value of a tool useful in life, both in social intercourse and in vocational pursuits. Thus the rise of Spanish to a position of importance in the curriculum was largely the result of a propagandist movement in the interest of establishing closer relations, commercial and social, with our neighbors of the Central and South American republics. But this value has been greatly overrated. Important though it be that we should have a larger knowledge of and a deeper sympathy for the Spanish-American peoples, the history of this enterprise has not been productive of any very direct results, except by awakening an interest in a subject otherwise remote from most of our lives. As a people we are by geographical condition too insular and too provincial to be able to take serious advantage of these opportunities, because the use we can make of Spanish for purposes of communication with Spanish-speaking peoples is so highly contingent as to be almost negligible to the rank and file of high-school students. To be sure, courses in Spanish are desirable for the specific purposes mentioned in certain schools of certain favored localities; but that is quite a different matter from the introduction of Spanish as a usual subject in the standard high school throughout the length and breadth of the land.

On the side of social value, French has perhaps received the greatest amount of support; for French has been the language of polite society, and our own leisure class, particularly the feminine element, has in the past often acquired merit through a smattering of this tongue. Indeed, the cultivation of French against the day

when one should make the Grand Tour of Europe was not, I think, an unimportant factor in promoting and stimulating its study in the high schools. But even though our leisure class should continue to regard the standard trip to Europe as a necessary part of liberal education, the complexion of our student population is changing rapidly with its growth, and we can hardly expect the desires of fond mothers that their sons and daughters should study a bit of French will long remain a dominant influence in shaping the curriculum of our high schools.

The study of German never had so much of this particular incentive, but there were others; for this study grew more rapidly in popularity than either French or Spanish during the years 1890 to 1915. There were various reasons, among which may be noted our relatively large German-speaking population, and perhaps the availability of more and better trained teachers of the subject. However, the war terminated this growth with great suddenness, and even under the most favorable conditions it will require a considerable time to bring German back to the level it had reached in 1915.

Although the study of French, Spanish, and Latin has probably been greatly stimulated by the fall of German, one may seriously question if this is more than an artificial and a temporary growth. For even prior to the war the question had been seriously raised whether the foreign languages were rightly entitled to a favored position in the course of study and a relative decline in their growth was already evident between 1910 and 1915.

To maintain a favored position in the curriculum of the present-day high school a subject must possess both intrinsic and extrinsic values. Of the two the latter are the more easily demonstrable, since they include the various uses to which a certain knowledge or course of training may be put. As already noted, both serious argument and propaganda have been employed in the defense and promotion of study in the various modern tongues for purely practical purposes. Yet the fact remains that few high-school students learn to use these languages effectively, or even find any important occasion either to speak or read them.

A continued decline in support and interest may therefore be expected if the standards of efficiency in teaching modern language are not kept at a high level. The appeal to Tom, Dick, and Harry

must be made on other grounds than that of foreign travel or foreign trade; and while the influence of the college will for some time continue to be felt through its requirements of foreign languages for admission, the day is past when this influence can altogether dominate the high school curricula. If modern-language study is not indicated for a considerable number of pupils in each high school, it will be withdrawn from the curriculum of some schools, as already it has been withdrawn from certain of the Agricultural high schools; and in subordinating it in other schools to special courses it is likely to lose the efficiency to which it had previously attained.

If our analysis is correct the future of modern-language study in our high schools is in no wise assured. We should therefore face the problem squarely, and if possible determine whether we are justified in attempting to save it; and, if so, by what means. The situation is not at all hopeless if our faith in the study of foreign languages as a central feature of the high-school course is substantially and worthily founded. Indeed, the very inertia of existing institutions, curricula, and administrative organizations makes it possible to carry on a lost cause long after a complete and convincing documentation of its defeat has been attested.

And hence the justification of modern-language study will go far to repair fortunes, even though a marked ebbing of the tide may precede its renewed flow. But justification must, I believe, be sought in the intrinsic merit of linguistic study rather than in any general or special utility which it might be supposed to possess, for the utility of a foreign tongue is always highly contingent as regards the average American high school pupil. On the other hand, the intrinsic value of linguistic study is more significant than a superficial view will detect; in that what is here implied happens to be an intangible source both of happiness and of mental efficiency. To be content with oneself is at the root of all effective conduct, and to secure this contentment one must be able not alone to use the necessary tool of language but likewise to enjoy its use. Such contentment is not a selfish pleasure, confined to one's own sense of gratification, but an aesthetic pleasure in whatever work one does to which linguistic expression in any way contributes.

Now the study of a foreign language is an important means of stimulating one's interest in language for itself. Indeed, there are

but two occasions for the arousal of such an interest. The first and most important occasion, though commonly neglected both by teacher and parent, arises during those first few years in which a child acquires his use of language in learning to understand, to speak and to write the vernacular. At this time words signify as words, and not merely as signs for objects and actions. Accordingly, the order of words, their looks, their sounds, their articulation, are all peculiarly impressive and delightful. It is nothing short of an adventure to listen, to speak, to read, and to write. Indeed, the advantage of this interest makes teaching so easy that I sometimes think the child learns his language despite the teacher's aid rather than because of it, so strikingly at variance are the teacher's methods and those that the child naturally employs. However that may be, it is not long before the child's natural interest in words and figures of speech, expressions, phrases, sentence-structure, rhyme, and rhythm, have given place to the set mechanical forms which convey meaning in stereotyped patterns.

The second occasion of gaining a renewed interest in the intrinsic merits of language is through the study of a foreign tongue. Here again one's attention is forcibly called to the parts of speech, and their articulation, to the very forms of thought as they find expression. Without this opportunity few persons without a special talent, which leads them to do much writing or public speaking, will ever give heed to the chief instrument of communication. Slovenly, or at least mechanical in habits of speech, they fail to appreciate the finer shades of thought and feeling, because they lack any effective means of communicating these to others; and thus of engaging in a profitable and enjoyable exchange of opinion in the course of which ideas are created.

The complaint which is perhaps most often leveled at the American student is that he has no ideas, that he is, indeed, uninterested in ideas; if this be true our methods in education must be very imperfect. While some will contend that verbal ideas are formal, and that practical ideas are more important, the truth remains that the practical affairs of life and its adjustments must somewhere originate in a creative act of mind, a vision beyond the horizon of the practical into the realm of the theoretical. The source of all intelligent behavior is the creative effort of a mind which thinks, and to communicate thought there must be a symbolic

medium such as language affords. Hence, our practical theorists in education delude themselves if they suppose that the world's work can be carried on through progressive stages by persons who do all their thinking by manipulations and other bodily adjustments. To become truly educative these adjustments must be formulated and expressed; and language is the chief means whereby we do both. Hence the difference between an educated and an uneducated man is chiefly a difference of linguistic capacity and ability. An uneducated person may be shrewd, he may even be efficient in doing the things which he has habituated himself to do; but he never rises above the source from which he has derived his skill and his technique; for he lacks the capacity of abstract thought, which takes place, not in a vacuum, but only through the medium of an appropriate expression. To be sure, there are persons whose education rests upon other means of thought and expression than those of language. There are the painter, the sculptor, the architect, the musician, the engineer. Yet all these can benefit, they certainly need not be hindered, through an ability to express themselves likewise in words; and words are and ever must be the most important mode of communication, and the most all-inclusive stimulus to intellectual effort.

If, then, one's interest in words in and for themselves is one of the prime requisites for a creative effort of mind, and if without such an interest the mind lacks an adequate stimulus to bring its work above the level of habitual and imitative performance, then it is obvious that the study of language under the most favorable conditions and with the aid of the most sound and effective methods must remain a cardinal element of education.

One can not say that every educated person must have studied a foreign language in order that he may be able to enjoy that contentment of soul which resides in a feeling of mastery over the materials of thought and its expression; but, I think one can say that, lacking a far more adequate method than we now possess for entering into and engaging the young child's original impulse toward linguistics, we must have recourse, at a later time, to some comparative study of language that will again throw into relief the nature of the word and its bearing upon other words.

In this connection I shall not enter into the question whether on the whole a more adequate method of training the young while

they are acquiring the mother tongue, so as to carry this interest continuously onwards, would not be more effective than a later arousal of interest through the study of a foreign language. The ancient Greeks, who seem to have made a success in their education of children and youth, appear to have known and practised such a method, using the vernacular. Nor shall I attempt to determine whether the study of the classics may be more or less valuable than the modern languages as a means of quickening thought and increasing both the happiness and the efficiency of life. There is much to be said on both accounts, and, as far as we can afford to do so, we should continue to offer and encourage both the ancient and the modern languages.

There are very few teachers who, whether by conscious design or by a natural impulse and method, are able to catch the young child's interest in words and preserve it through the years of growth so that language remains for him a living instrument and not a mere external garment of thought. The philosophy of this interest is too subtle for any ordinary course in pedagogy; and without the important adjuncts of music and the dance, which the Greeks employed, it would be difficult to cultivate it with any thoroughness, or with any great confidence as to its positive results. On the other hand, one may bring a student to the realization of the intrinsic value of linguistics by introducing him to the vocabulary, the grammar, and the syntax of a foreign tongue, and thereby create in him anew that spirit of adventure in a field that will inspire him to practice and perfect himself in pronunciation and in composition. The bare bones of a formalized grammatical training will not accomplish this end, because it sets too high a premium upon mere drill and habit-formation. Nor will a "direct method" which over-emphasizes the *Realien* be likely to accomplish more; since again the attention is directed upon the extraneous results of linguistic usage, rather than upon the intrinsic value of language as a medium of thought and expression. But between these extremes a method of linguistic instruction can be found, that is calculated to lead a student into the world of ideas.

If the serious study of foreign languages is at present in jeopardy, so much the greater must be our efforts to repair its efficiency in the course of study, in order that its intrinsic merits, if dimmed by faint-hearted or feeble efforts of instruction, may be

speedily restored to the brightness and lustre of a vitally interesting subject, capably treated.

For after all, whatever the nature of the attack, the fact remains that foreign languages are eminently teachable subjects; instruction in them has long been practised in the school room; the accepted methods are well-conceived and well-adapted to the most effective execution. This can perhaps be said in equal measure of no other subject save mathematics.

When one considers that since the time of Herbert Spencer's treatise on Education [1860], natural and physical science has been accepted as an indispensable feature of the high-school course, and that nevertheless we are still experimenting with regard to an appropriate selection of material and an appropriate method of instruction, one may realize in comparison how firm a hold the study of foreign languages has upon the curriculum, both by reason of its method and by reason of its efficiency as a subject of study. And this is our chief safeguard against the iconoclasm of the present and the future; for though it be difficult on the basis of practical utility to make out the positive case that Mr. Flexner has demanded, for what other subjects of study can a better case be made? Is it carpentry, perhaps, under school conditions so markedly different from those of the shop, and while the practical interests of the child are those of adventure rather than those of daily labor?

The truth of the matter is that a child's interest in words is more concrete and more practical to him than is his interest in building a house after the approved manner of an architect; nor has the adolescent entirely lost all appreciation of the savor that attaches to the fundamental instruments of thought—the word, the diagram, and the number. Accordingly, we need not despair even if this materialistic era of reconstruction does unduly and unreasonably insist upon its pound of flesh. If we have faith, we shall also have hope, and our faith, since it rests upon the truth, should be abiding, and our hope the greater.

To educate young men and young women to be responsible agents, to teach them to observe for themselves, to think for themselves, to express their thoughts, and, in all, to enjoy themselves; this seems to be our chief concern as teachers. The means whereby these desirable results may be accomplished are various; some

overlap, and some are adapted variously to various individual traits and characteristics, but among them all, linguistic training occupies an important and an essential place. The training of a student to understand and to use a language other than his native tongue is not in every case indispensable, but in many cases so, and its positive value as a means of quickening one's intellectual life, and furnishing this with new materials for thought and the creation of ideas, can not be seriously questioned.

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